

No Data, No Problem: Government of India in Denial about Migrant Worker Deaths and Distress in the Monsoon Session of Parliament

A Response by Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN)

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Sixteen migrant workers were run over by a cargo train while sleeping on the railway track on their walk home, forty seven died of exhaustion on their thousand kilometer walk home on foot because they were out of food, [96 workers died](#) in their journey aboard Shramik trains on their way home. These are just some categories of **at least 971 documented non-COVID deaths during lockdown**. Most of them are of migrants and their families. And, these are conservative figures. These deaths were [closely tracked and painstakingly compiled](#) by students and researchers. It is almost in anticipation of a day like September 14, 2020, when the Government of India (GoI) denied that these deaths even happened because they did not collect this data. The cause of these grim statistics point directly to the unilaterally imposed unplanned lockdown by the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, from a pulpit behind a television camera on March 24, 2020.

Shri Gangwar's response to questions concerning migrant workers' deaths and loss of livelihoods in the Parliament has exposed the utter incompetence and callousness of the Ministry of Labour and Employment for the lives of the very workers it is **mandated** to protect. The GoI has absolved its core responsibility to compensate or address this issue by declaring that it has no data. Since the GoI has evaded its accountability of having manufactured the biggest humanitarian crisis in India since 1947, we, the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) will attempt to systematically respond to the [6 questions posed by Shri K. Navaskani, Shri Suresh Narayan Dhanorkar and Shri Adoor Prakash](#). Several other MPs also raised questions about steps being taken by the Government to address the distress of migrant workers.

In May 2020, the Supreme Court of India took suo motu cognizance of the migrant crisis that was caused due the COVID-19 lockdown. During the hearing, the Solicitor General, Tushar Mehta, stated that, "[We have shifted over 1 crore migrant labourers and over 92,000 meals have been served to the migrant workers as on 26 May.](#)" As part of the [judgement](#) the Court directed the central government to "*give details of all schemes which can be availed by migrant workers who have returned to their native places.*"

We present some key insights from 8 different compilations and studies (including SWAN) that have been put out by reputed organisations, economists, universities, research institutions and journalists and **are all available in the public domain**. Each of these presents data on deaths, extent of loss of livelihoods and income, and food insecurity created due to the lockdown.

Answers to Unstarred Question No. 174 Regarding the Return of Migrant Workers to Their Hometowns to be answered on 14.09.2020

Will the Minister of LABOUR AND EMPLOYMENT be pleased to state:

- (a) **whether the Government has the data of migrant workers who returned to their own states from various states during the national lock down period and if so, the details thereof, State-wise;**

Government Response: A statement is enclosed

(b) The number of such labourers died/ injured during migration to their native places due to such lockdown, State/ UT-wise

Government Response: No such data is available

SWAN Response: During the course of the various lockdowns, as of 4 July 2020, there have been at least 971 deaths according to one curated data source. There may be many other cases that have not been included here but have been reported and fact checked by civil society groups, the media and local administration.

(Source: thej.in/go/lockdown)

Cause of Deaths	Number of Deaths (numbers determined as of 4/7/2020)
Starvation and Financial Distress (Combined)	216
Lack of Medical Care	77
Road or Train Accidents	209
Deaths in Shramik Trains	96
Suicides	133
Deaths in Quarantine Centers	49
Lockdown associated Crimes	18
Police Brutality	12
Alcohol Withdrawal Related	49
Exhaustion	48
Unclassified	65
TOTAL	971

(c) whether the Government has provided any compensation/economic assistance to the victim's family and if so, the details thereof

Government response: Question does not arise in view of (b) above

SWAN Response: In response to an accident that occurred in Uttar Pradesh that left 24 migrant workers dead, the Prime Minister on May 16, 2020 tweeted, " *An ex-gratia of Rs 2 lakh each for the next of kin of those who lost their lives due to the unfortunate accident in Auraiya, UP has been approved from the PM's National Relief Fund.*" The Gol has not made any public statement substantiating the payment of these ex-gratia amounts.

In response to the deaths of exhausted migrant workers on the railway tracks of Aurangabad, the Railways has

stated that since the workers were asleep on the railway tracks, which is a crime, there will be no payment to the victims' families.

On the 80+ shramik train deaths, no compensation has been paid. [Media reports](#) as of 28th June state that "railways officials are still collecting the data and the exercise is not complete as states are yet to send the required data".

(d) whether the Government has done any assessment of the job loss among migrant workers due to the COVID-19 crisis and if so, the details thereof

Government response: No such data is available

SWAN Response: There are several studies that have provided figures that estimate the job loss, income and food insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown. We cite only a few here with sample size. The Centre for Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University has put together a comprehensive compilation of studies [here](#)

S/L	Institution	Extent of Job & Income Loss	Extent of Food Insecurity
1.	Workers in the time of COVID-10 by Action Aid India Sample size=11,537 across 21 states and 690 districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Over three-fourths lost their livelihoods since lockdown Close to half had received no wages during lockdown. 17% received partial wages. 53% had incurred additional debt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 out of 6 people said that their food consumption was insufficient. This is massive decline compared to 17 percent whose food consumption was insufficient before lockdown Before lockdown, 93 percent ate 2 meals a day. Since lockdown, only 63 percent ate 2 meals a day 3 out of 4 could not access healthcare when needed during lockdown
2.	International Labour Organization and the Asian Development Bank (Tackling the COVID-19 youth employment crisis in Asia and the Pacific)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 41 lakh youth in India lost jobs due to the Covid-19 pandemic with most job losses in the construction and farm sector Youth unemployment rose from 23.3% to 29.5% as a result of the short containment caused by Covid-19. In the 6-month scenario, job losses for youth may equal 61 lakh in India 	
3.	Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two-thirds lost work. Few informal workers who were still employed lost 50% earnings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80% households had reduced food intake Around 80% urban households did not have enough money for next

	<p>Sample size=5,000 respondents across 12 states</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excluding farmers, around three-fourth of workers lost employment. • Nearly 90% of the urban self-employed lost employment and 91% of BPL households lost employment • 67% did not receive the promised money to their Jan Dhan accounts. • Even among regular wage workers, half received either no salary or reduced salary during the lockdown. • An overwhelming majority of farmers could either not sell their produce or had to sell at lower prices. 	<p>month's rent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60 percent in urban areas did not have enough money for a week's worth of essentials • Migrants and urban Muslims most affected • Women and disadvantaged caste groups were more adversely affected
4.	<p><u>The efficacy of government entitlements in helping BPL families navigate the financial impacts of COVID-19 by Dalberg</u> Sample size= 18,000 April 2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By mid-April 53% had lost their pre-crisis incomes • Half have lost three-fourths of their incomes, a quarter have exhausted their savings, 40% have taken additional debt • Three-fourth of primary income earners have lost jobs or wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By the end of May 9 out of 10 households had received PDS grains but half received pulses
5.	<p>Jan Sahas <u>(Voices of Invisible Citizens)</u> Sample size=3196 (April 2020)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the first 21 days of the lockdown 92.5% of labourers lost one to three weeks of work. • 94% of workers did not have a Builders and Construction workers ID card, preventing them from receiving state benefits of Rs. 32,000 crore. • 31% of workers stated they have taken loans that they will not be able to repay due to loss of wages. • Only 17% of the 60,000 workers in the Jan Sahas database have a bank account, preventing them from receiving government aid in the form of direct bank transfers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42% of workers said they did not have the ration supply needed to last through the initial lockdown.

6.	COVID-19 Rural Survey Findings by Centre for Studying Developing Societies Sample size: 25,371 23 states, 179 districts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Close to 80% stated that the unemployment situation in their village was either “quite serious” or “very serious” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 78 percent stated they they had found it “quite difficult” or “very difficult” to feed their families during the lockdown
7.	SWAN Reports Coverage: 36,343 workers, 25 states (throughout the lockdown at the time workers reached out)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Only 4% got paid during the lockdown. ● 84% had not been paid during the lockdown. ● 64% had less than Rs 100 when they reached out ● Only 348 received Rs 500 in their Jan Dhan Accounts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 82% had not received rations during lockdown. ● 72% had less than 2 days of rations left ● 64% had not received any cooked food

(e)whether the mostly migrant workers returned to their home by walking due to no arrangements by the Union Government in time; and (f) if so, the details thereof and reasons therefore?

Government response: The Indian Railway has operated more than 4611 Shramik Special Trains for convenience of the workers. More than 63.07 lakh migrant workers have been shifted to various destinations located in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and other States. Food and water was also provided free of cost to the workers during their journey.

SWAN response: It was more than one month after the total lockdown was imposed without any relief for migrant workers stranded in cities without cash and food, that the Ministry of Home Affairs issued its first set of orders related to migrant travel. By this time thousands had already begun walking or reached home on foot, in what will be remembered as one of the largest movements of people since partition. These orders were confusing, conflicting and vague. The travel protocols established by different state governments had many gaps. Consequently, a second exodus of migrant workers walking home has begun with tragic reports of deaths along the way. A detailed documentation of the issues related to travel and the tragedies that ensued can be found in the [third SWAN report: To Leave or Not to Leave? Lockdown, Migrant Workers and their Journeys Home](#)

It is a matter of national shame and a continued assault on the dignity of the estimated 45 crore informal workforce that even five months after the lockdown, the Gol has no data on deaths and distress. In fact the numbers presented in the Parliament yesterday are not starkly different from those presented by the Solicitor General in the Supreme Court during the hearing in May. As per the [2017 Economic Survey](#) there are about 13.9 crore migrant workers. The Finance Minister announced a relief package assuming there are 8 crore migrants. The office of [Chief Labour Commissioner stated that there are 26 lakh migrants](#). In light of their own estimates, albeit conflicting, the Gol’s response stating that it does not have the data or does not have access to it is an act of renunciation of its duties and an attempt to hide its negligence behind a purported absence of data. The least that the Gol could have done is clicked on the hyperlinks of these reports and responded to the people of India in the parliament. It should be unacceptable to every Indian that watched the humanitarian crisis unfold on their TV screens that just because the Gol failed to use its machinery to collect and verify data on migrant worker deaths and distress, it can get away with evading the question on the floor of the House.

About SWAN

The Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) started a helpline to address the needs of stranded migrant workers since the lockdown was announced on March 24, 2020. SWAN coordinated relief efforts such as arranging for rations, transferring money directly to the workers' accounts through crowdsourced funds and assisting in travel back home from places where they were stranded. In the process, SWAN documented the distress induced by severe food insecurity and cash availability and woefully inadequate government and judicial response to the crisis. [Three reports, first on April 15, second on May 1 and the third on June 8](#), to this end were released addressing the changing nature of distress through the lockdown. Between March 26, 2020 and July 3, 2020, SWAN co-ordinated relief work for more than 36,000 migrant workers and transferred more than Rs 60 lakhs directly to the workers' accounts.

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